

Putting the Green in Pink and Green: Sweet Briar's Environmental Tendencies 1950-2000

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Since the original colonies in North America began to form themselves into states, it was not long before geographical differences also became cultural differences. Whereas, religious fundamentalists settled the colony of Massachusetts, primarily second and third sons of the aristocracy of England settled the Virginia colony. Since the first attempts to write the constitution of the newly emerging United States of America, the North and South have had differing opinions on many things and emphasized different aspects of their culture.

In the North, industry became synonymous with wealth, while in the South, agriculture became the foundation of wealth and social position. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a graduate from Sweet Briar College, Amy Thompson McCandless said in her work *Preserving the Pedestal*, “Just as the eighteenth-century founding fathers had relied upon properly educated ‘republican mothers’ to inculcate national values and democratic behaviors, so the twentieth-century Southern patriarchs looked to the women’s colleges to produce alumnae who would preserve Southern distinctiveness.”¹

The South wanted their distinctive traits to remain different from the North.

Since “Southern distinctiveness” referred to an agriculturally based society, it was only natural that women would possess the knowledge of how best to preserve her lands. To quote the Foreword in the Bulletin of Sweet Briar College: The Virginia Conservation Guide, “Sweet Briar has always been interested in conservation. The College farm was one of the first in the County to practice strip cropping for the prevention of soil erosion. The three thousand acre campus has been kept a refuge for wildlife since the very

¹ Amy Thompson McCandless, “Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1949,” *History of Higher Education Annual*. Vol. 7 (1987): 45.

founding of the college, and for years Sweet Briar has been a State Game Sanctuary.”²

Sweet Briar is in the middle of 3,250 acres of Virginia land, only a small part of which is occupied by buildings. Throughout its history, Sweet Briar women have often enjoyed and partaken in the preservation of their campus. Even in 1950, the students were writing articles talking about how little time they had to enjoy the outdoors, showing that they understood the healthy relationship that nature and education have.

Only twenty years later the faculty worked to capitalize on that understanding and start a department that would teach the students the skills to protect the world not just their campus. Initially environmental awareness was prompted by the faculty but it was quickly embraced by the students. While the faculty at Sweet Briar College was influential in raising awareness of environmental issues, the alumnae, and then the students, took it from there. As the alumnae worked in their communities to promote global awareness, the students developed their own organizations to help preserve the Sweet Briar environment. The students started at a local level and place close to their hearts, but the lessons they were learning would translate to preserving the global environment.

In tracking Sweet Briar’s environmental trends from the 1950’s, both the yearbooks and the college catalogs were extremely informative. The yearbooks were helpful since they were written by students and reflected their thoughts just as the college catalog was helpful because it gave a good sampling of the faculty’s thoughts. Since preserving the environment was considered the same as preserving “Southern distinctiveness,” the public relations office thought of the environmental program at

² Bertha P. Wales, “Foreword,” Bulletin of Sweet Briar College: The Virginia Conservation Guide (Sweet Briar: Sweet Briar College, vol. XXIII, no 2, 1940). Archives of Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar, VA.

Sweet Briar as a hot topic and compiled a folder with everything from meeting minutes to newspaper articles referring to the program. SWEEP, a student run organization, was also very good at keeping records of their actions so they could show that they were doing their part maintaining the South's identity. There were a variety of sources relating to Sweet Briar's environmental tendencies because the environment has been a defining element of Sweet Briar.

The yearbook from 1950 has pictures of the Head of Cabin and Head of Lake which shows that students held leadership roles relating to the environment.³ There was also a file which contained the *Rules and Regulations passed by the Board of overseers Governing the use of Sweet Briar Lake*, written by the Director of Buildings and Grounds, Lloyd R. Hoilman in May of 1956. The rules state that only certain people were allowed to fish and canoe, reemphasizing the fact that time and energy were being put into preserving the Lake environment.⁴ There were no other connections to the environment in the yearbook until 1965 when seniors not only had their formal pictures but they each had a silly picture, of which some were outdoors. By 1968, all of the senior pictures were taken outdoors, replacing the standard of the formal pictures.

Meanwhile, the courses at Sweet Briar were also changing to reflect the student and faculty's long standing but rejuvenated interest in the environment. In the Sweet Briar catalog from 1959-1960 a Sociology course, "Contemporary Social Problems," was being offered. It covered "problems arising from major changes in population, modern

³ *The Briar Patch* 1950, Published by the Junior Class (Benson Printing Co. Nashville, TN) 104. Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

⁴ Lloyd R. Hoilman, "Rules and Regulations Passed by the Board of Overseers Governing the Use of Sweet Briar Lake," (May 1956). Archives of Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar, VA.

technology, industrial expansion, and urbanization.”⁵ There were three Sociology courses listed in the 1969-1970 catalog dealing with population, the community, and social problems. Those courses demonstrate Sweet Briar faculty’s awareness of the issues facing the Southern environment outside the campus and their attempt to teach the students how best to help.

In 1970, Sweet Briar women, students and alumnae alike, united to protect the environment at large. While on campus they learned that the environment is an important element in making Sweet Briar special. The skills that they learned while at Sweet Briar and their desire to improve the world together was the incentive for the Workshop on the Environment. A letter sent to the local newspaper from the Office of Public Relations on November 2, 1970 talks of the upcoming environmental workshop at Sweet Briar College for the alumnae. Sweet Briar urged its 8,000 alumnae to work with the college to raise awareness of environmental issues.⁶ The purpose of the workshop on the environment was to “direct [the alumnae’s] interests and energies to what [had] become the major problem of [their] society, man’s need to re-learn to live in harmony with his environment.”⁷ The alumnae were brought back to Sweet Briar for a weekend of lectures on the environmental issues. Each alumnae group was then “provided with material to direct selected research and studies in their communities. They [were to] investigate what other organizations [were] planning and doing, to join forces when possible.”⁸ The

⁵ Sweet Briar Bulletin: Catalog Edition 1959-1960 (Virginia, Sweet Briar, 1959): 95. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

⁶ Martha von Briesen, letter to *The News*, Lynchburg, VA, 2 November, 1970. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

women of Sweet Briar were going to share what they already knew with the country, the environment matters, and it is up to the people to protect it.

Besides the move to involve the alumnae, Sweet Briar was also working to involve the government. In December of 1970, Julia M. Jacobsen, the Coordinator of Government Relations, wrote in a letter to Dr. Robert Kinsinger, that "Sweet Briar College is now among the leaders in the undergraduate field of environmental studies. The National Science Foundation has strengthened our resources in the sciences and the Office of Education offers support for another aspect of this project." This shows that Sweet Briar was receiving support from outside organizations in its attempt to raise environmental awareness on campus. Since the South wanted to protect its identity based on agriculture, it is no wonder that there was outside support for Sweet Briar's environmental preservation movement. Mrs. Jacobsen continues on to say, "With support for establishment of the Center we will have the capability and the opportunity to be the pilot for a liberal arts program in environmental studies. We will also be able to serve as an effective regional center for environmental research, training and community education."⁹ It appears that Mrs. Jacobsen is asking for financial support from Mr. Kinsinger with the idea of helping Sweet Briar to not only improve its own program but help the surrounding community as well. Attempts continued to be made at achieving outside support and involving the surrounding colleges as can be seen by a letter sent to Faculty from the Instruction Committee on February 4, 1972. It said, "A proposal has gone to the National Endowment for the humanities and the National Science Foundation requesting certain funds for environmental studies to be offered by a consortium

⁹ Julia M, Jacobsen, letter to Dr. Robert Kinsinger, 9 December, 1970. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

consisting of Lynchburg college, Randolph Macon Woman's College, and Sweet Briar College.”¹⁰ The involvement of other colleges reemphasizes the attempt being made by people within the South to preserve the South's distinctiveness.

The 1971-1972 catalog reiterates the fact that environmental awareness was being raised at Sweet Briar. There was a Biology course on “Conservation and the Agenda for Tomorrow”. There was also a Sociology course on “Urban Studies”. Both courses show that the students were interested in conserving the natural, untainted environment. While courses were being offered in other departments relating to environmental issues, Sweet Briar brought in Dr. Langley H. Wood to organize an Environmental Studies program in the late 1960's early 1970's.¹¹ Wood worked with departments such as art, biology, chemistry, English, math, physics, psychology, religion, anthropology and sociology, economics, government, and history who were all very interested in helping develop the curriculum and topics for future classes. The wide variety of interested departments shows that preserving the environment matters to people because of their common interest in maintaining the South's identity. Not only was the faculty excited about the new major, the president of Sweet Briar was too.¹² In the *Daily Advance* Wood was quoted saying “the new Environmental Studies program is being designed to give the student ‘a point of view’ of the environment and the number of fields involved in its study.”¹³ The idea was greeted with more enthusiasm perhaps than at Northern schools

¹⁰ Instruction Committee, letter to Faculty, 4 February 1972. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹¹ Dave Clark, “Lynchburg Native Coordinates Sweet Briar College Work,” *Daily Advance*, Lynchburg, VA, 2 April 1973. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹² Minutes and Summary Report of the “Core Planning Faculty” and or Steering Committee for the Sweet Briar Environmental Studies Program, 22 March 1973. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹³ *Daily Advance*, 2 April 1973.

because the students and faculty who choose to be at Sweet Briar had already made a conscious decision that environment matters.

Again reiterating the fact that the Faculty as a whole was interested in the development of the Environmental program, the Faculty asked President Whiteman of Sweet Briar College, to hold a faculty workshop in 1973. The Faculty wanted to discuss potential topics and bring in outside speakers to broaden their understanding of the topic. The President himself was present for much of the workshop as was Mrs. Jacobsen, the Coordinator for Government Relations.¹⁴ Ideas such as "American Writer's Attitudes Toward Total Environment," "Ecological Perspectives in Anthropology," and "History of Environmental Concern," show the true range of topics to be covered in the Environmental courses. Sweet Briar was working hard to tie in all aspects of the environment and its importance to Southern culture.

In the 1974-1975 catalog, Wood is mentioned as faculty and besides a Biology class, "Biology of Pollution," there was also a special program listed. The special program was Environmental Studies and was said to "[enable] a student majoring in any discipline to coordinate her major with Environmental Studies." The first environmental course was known as "The Environment: What are Man's Choices." The faculty decided that it should be broken down into four sections, Historical, Scientific, Ethics, and a combination of Social, Legislative, and Economic. The course would show the students the "Big Picture" and how they could use the skills they learned at Sweet Briar to protect the world while also maintaining the South's identity. The catalog for the next academic year, 1975-1976, had Environmental Studies still listed as a special program. It now consisted of one more purely environmental course, "Environmental Issues: An

¹⁴ Minutes and Summary Report, 22 March 1973.

International Prospective," as well as courses in Biology, Government, Physics, and Senior Seminar that were related. A change that happened that drastically shows that there was a lot of interest in the first year of the program to warrant more time and energy put into the development of the program.

In the meantime, the senior pictures in the 1970 yearbook were taken outdoors. The seniors are sitting in trees, leaves, flowers, grass, and even on horseback. Though there were not environmental majors yet, the basis was there. The move from indoor photographs to outdoor photographs shows the reconnection of the students with their Southern identity. By 1975, there was a professor of and one student majoring in, environmental studies. The yearbook opened with pictures of the campus with nature kept in mind. Each picture was mostly landscape with maybe one building. All of the pictures in 1980's yearbook, seniors and underclassmen alike were taken outdoors. SWEBOP, an outdoor group first appeared in the 1985 yearbook. A group that offered wilderness training and organized canoeing certification, the very existence of SWEBOP shows that students were interested in spending their time outdoors.

Lynn Gordon says, "...student life helped women transfer energies from the family to the more public world of the college community, where they learned leadership, organizational skills, and developed friendships."¹⁵ The creation of environmentally related clubs and projects such as SWEBOP and later SWEEP, show that Sweet Briar women were taking part in the development and improvement of their community. SWEEP, Sweet Briar Environmental Project was started in 1988 and worked to encourage recycling on campus for which the only benefit to the campus was the money

¹⁵ Lynn Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, (Yale University Press, 1991), 34.

they earned from recycling.¹⁶ This move shows that Sweet Briar women recognized that they could help preserve the environment and consequently maintain the South's identity, by starting at a local level and getting bigger. With that attitude it is no surprise that in its very first year of existence, SWEEP won a Distinguished Service Citation in the College and University Awards program.¹⁷ From 1988-1990 SWEEP earned a total of \$712.75 from recycling 55.45 tons.¹⁸ SWEEP was asked to present the program for ten Southwestern Virginia colleges at a conference held at Emory and Henry College in 1989. It also helped other schools develop a similar program.¹⁹ Though SWEEP was not able to earn money by recycling after 1990,²⁰ the group still worked to improve the recycling habits of the college to benefit the world if not their school. They had the use of Styrofoam discontinued, met with staff to discuss double-sided copying, and the possible use of recycled paper.²¹

Sweet Briar's tie to nature has existed since the beginning. It was founded in the middle of the Virginia country side specifically to immerse its students in the environment that defines the South. Consequently, the women who graduated from Sweet Briar had an appreciation for nature that was deeply rooted. When the South was trying to stress its agricultural base, Sweet Briar was among the first to get environmental programs up and running. Faculty, alumnae, and students alike, joined together to learn more about their environment and to promote awareness. The faculty developed courses

¹⁶ Recycling pamphlets created by SWEEP in 1988. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹⁷ Earl J. Shiflet, letter to Ms. Lu Ann Hunt Student Coordinator, 29 November 1988. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar VA.

¹⁸ Totals Collected and Recycled by SWEEP, November 1988-August 1990. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

¹⁹ Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Environmental Project, document explaining and validating the club. 1992-1993. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

²⁰ Bryant Salvage Company, Inc, letter to SWEEP, September 1990. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

²¹ Sweet Briar Environmental Project Summary, 1992-1993

to show students just how many fields were tied to the environment. The alumnae worked within their communities to raise awareness and enthusiasm for preserving the South's distinctiveness. The students worked to make changes on their campus and in the local community by doing hands on projects such as recycling. Sweet Briar understood the importance of the environment because of the hands on experience within the campus. As a result, the surrounding community looked to Sweet Briar to lead the way in preserving the bigger picture, the "South's distinctiveness."

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Minutes and Summary Report of the “Core Planning Faculty” and or Steering Committee for the Sweet Briar Environmental Studies Program, 22 March, 1973. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Showed a timeline of the Environmental Studies Program’s development. This document was received by the Public Relations office 3 April 1973.

Recycling pamphlets created by SWEEP in 1988. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Showed what the students were doing on campus to participate in the preservation of the South’s distinctness.

Sweet Briar Bulletin: Catalog Edition 1959-1960. Virginia, Sweet Briar, 1959: 95. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Showed the courses that Sweet Briar was offering. I was able to see what the Faculty deemed important topics as well as whom the faculty was.

Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Environmental Project, document explaining and validating the club. 1992-1993. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Showed that SWEEP was a project recognized, supported, and appreciated by the School.

The Briar Patch 1950, Published by the Junior Class (Benson Printing Co. Nashville, TN) 104. Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

Shows the students’ ideas of what is important. I also used the yearbook to track environmental clubs and majors.

Totals Collected and Recycled by SWEEP, November 1988-August 1990. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

A document that shows how much money SWEEP earned by recycling.

Bryant Salvage Company, Inc, letter to SWEEP, September 1990. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

A letter that tells SWEEP that recycling is not longer profitable.

Dave Clark. "Lynchburg Native Coordinates Sweet Briar College Work." *Daily Advance*, Lynchburg, VA, 2 April, 1973. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

I used this source to see how the local community was responding to Sweet Briar's efforts to start and Environmental Program.

Hoilman, Lloyd R. "Rules and Regulations Passed by the Board of Overseers Governing the Use of Sweet Briar Lake." (May 1956). Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

A document that shows that there were rules regarding the Lake and other aspects of the Sweet Briar campus.

Instruction Committee. Letter to Faculty, 4 February 1972. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Shows that other colleges are interested in joining with Sweet Briar to preserve the South's identity. Received by the Public Relations Office 7 February 1972.

Jacobsen, Julia M. Letter to Dr. Robert Kinsinger, 9 December, 1970. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Mrs. Jacobsen is the Coordinator of Government Relations. The letter she writes shows that Sweet Briar is seeking funding from outside sources.

Earl J. Shiflet. Letter to Ms. Lu Ann Hunt Student Coordinator, 29 November 1988. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar VA.

This letter shows that Sweet Briar's actions are being recognized across the state of Virginia.

Von Briesen, Martha. Letter to *The News*, Lynchburg, VA, 2 November, 1970. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar, VA.

Since Ms. Von Briesen is the Director of the Office of Public Relations, her letter to

The News shows that she is trying to publicize Sweet Briar's achievements.

Wales, Bertha P. "Foreword." Bulletin of Sweet Briar College: The Virginia Conservation Guide. Sweet Briar: Sweet Briar College, vol. XXIII, no 2, 1940.

Since the Foreword was written by someone who has no real affiliation with the college, it shows that Sweet Briar has been recognized throughout its existence for the preservation of its environment.

Secondary Sources:

Gordon, Lynn. *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*. Yale University Press, 1991), 34.

I used this source to show that women were partaking in meaningful activities.

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1949," *History of Higher Education Annual*. Vol. 7 (1987): 45.

I used this source to show that the South was making a conscious effort to preserve the land since it associated land with its identity.